Cuba: first among equals

Many countries supported Africa's anticolonial struggles, but none with as much commitment as Cuba.

**SOUTH AFRICA** and Cuba mark the 20th anniversary of bilateral relations this year. We choose to mark this landmark event during the past month of May, which was designated as Africa Month and which marks the founding on May 25, 1963 of the Organization of African Unity, now known as the African Union.

We do this because the relationship between the two nations is an example of the history of the struggle for independence against colonization, imperialism and apartheid. Africa cannot be free without reflecting the role of Cuba in the liberation struggle. Although many countries supported these struggles, Cuba remains the first among equals.

Cubans are counterinsurgents who assisted the African continent to achieve independence, freedom, justice, and self-reliance. From the Cape Verde to Guinea Bissau, from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Western Sahara, from Angola to Somaliland and South Africa, to mention but a few, Cuban combatants fought side by side with our liberation movements and their own sweat and blood. They paid the ultimate price, with thousands of Cuban combatants dying in these struggles and many more injured. Their spirit of self-necrosis and human solidarity with the oppressed people of Africa knew no limits.

The apartheid regime implemented a destructive regional destabilization foreign policy in our front line states in the 70s and 80s led by the mighty and ruthless South Africa. The African Defence Force (SADF) was unable to prevent the ANC from becoming independent and host the ANC. Cuban forces deployed more than 50,000 combatants and spent billions of rands in fighting the SADF in this regard.

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Their role in the fight against the imperialist forces in Angola and the victory at Cuito Cuanavale not only freed Angola but became a key gate crashed which resulted in the independence of Namibia and the end of the Cold War.

Cubans were also never hesitant to raise their voices on behalf of the oppressed peoples in our national forums. They opposed that apartheid was declared a crime against humanity by the United Nations.

As early as 1984, at the UN General Assembly, the revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, called upon the international community to act against South Africa's repressive and racist regime.

Cuba also hosted the historic 7th Continental Conference in 1986 during which it pledged solidarity and support in the struggle for self-determination of countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Cuba's continued involvement in the struggle against apartheid began shortly after its proclamation and was further strengthened in 1977 during the visit to Cuba by then ANC president Oliver Tambo. This was followed by the establishment of the ANC's representative office in Havana in 1979.

In our collective resolve to further strengthen our longstanding friendship, we opened a diplomatic mission in Havana immediately after the democratic government assumed office in 1994. Similarly, our Cuban counterparts established a resident diplomatic mission in Pretoria in 1995. After a year, our mission in Pretoria was upgraded to the level of a full embassy.

Cuba's contribution in Africa did not end with its independence. It has continued to assist many countries across our continent with the deployment of health and other professionals and the development of cheaper vaccinations for malaria, tuberculosis and the Ebola virus among other things. This was done despite Cuba's own economic difficulties and continues to assist due to the illegitimacy economic blockade and strength imposed by the US.

Since the establishment of our formal diplomatic ties we too have contributed to benefit from Cuba's assistance to help us build a better life for all and ensure our vision of a moral and nonviolent democratic society.

Over the past two decades the Cuban government has deployed Cuban professionals in areas where we have a shortage of skills: beginning in the area of health. It has now expanded to areas such as labour, defence, social development, housing, water, sanitation and infrastructure.

Over the past two decades hundreds of Cuban medical staff, engineers, planners and architects worked in South Africa, most of them deployed to the poorest and most rural areas of the country. They unselfishly rendered important services to our poor and marginalized communities on a daily basis. There are more than 300 of them still selflessly serving our communities.

Equally, more than 400 South Africans from disadvantaged backgrounds have qualified as medical doctors and about 1,000 young South Africans are receiving medical training in Cuba.

In a world where the dominant narrative is one of market fundamentalism which is characterized by individualism, materialism, greed, poverty and inequality, Cuba has shown us that it is possible to create an alternative society grounded on the principles and spirit of socialism, justice and human solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. This, I believe, is the greatest export. As we move forward into the two decades of our bilateral relations we must reflect on the role of Cuba in our history.

**Key points**

1. South Africa and Cuba mark the 20th anniversary of bilateral relations this year.
2. We choose to mark this landmark event during the past month of May, which was designated as Africa Month and which marks the founding of the Organization of African Unity, now known as the African Union.
3. We do this because the relationship between the two nations is an example of the history of the struggle for independence against colonization, imperialism and apartheid.
4. Africa cannot be free without reflecting the role of Cuba in the liberation struggle.
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9. The apartheid regime implemented a destructive regional destabilization foreign policy in our front line states in the 70s and 80s led by the mighty and ruthless South Africa.
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